

Behind Our Breakthrough With the PLO

An Inside Account of How We Began Our Dialogue With Arafat

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By Rita E. Hauser

LAST WEEK'S breakthrough in the Middle East peace process has been taking shape for more than a year. As someone who played a behind-the-scenes role in bringing about the new dialogue between the United States and the Palestine Liberation Organization, perhaps I can explain how we got to where we are and where all of us—America, Israel and the PLO—should go from here.

The decisive moment for me came early Wednesday morning. I had just appeared on ABC's "Nightline" with PLO spokesman Bassam Abu Sharif and urged him, on the air, to recognize Israel more explicitly than Yasser Arafat had done in his speech that day to the United Nations. At 1 a.m., after the show, Abu Sharif called me from Geneva and said that Arafat wanted to be sure that if he said the magic words, Secretary of State George Shultz would indeed begin a dialogue with the PLO.

"Are you are really sure, Rita?" asked Abu Sharif. "Are you absolutely sure? Or will it be one more time and then Shultz will ask for something else?"

Absolutely not, I said. "This is it, and you have known for a long time that this is it. I swear to you it will happen if you say the words." I felt confident in making this promise, because I had spoken that day to Richard Murphy, the assistant secretary of state for the Middle East, and he had made clear to me that if they said it, it would happen. President Reagan had said the same thing publicly.

Arafat did say it, and it did happen, and the Middle East will never be quite the same. But I was struck by the fact that right down to the end, Arafat had such mistrust.

The process that culminated Wednesday with Arafat's press conference and Shultz's announcement began a year ago with the Palestinian uprising. The uprising demonstrated to the PLO leadership that empty words, isolated acts of terrorism and the general posturing of Yasser Arafat had to be replaced by a realistic political program. The goal had to be achieving what was possible: not the destruction of Israel, but the

withdrawal of Israeli forces from the West Bank and Gaza, true autonomy and, hopefully, with time, the ac-

See PLO, C2, Col. 3

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PLO, From C1

ceptance by Israel of a small Palestinian state on its eastern border.

The PLO showed that it understood this new reality during my lengthy discussions with Arafat and other executive committee members in separate visits to Stockholm in November and December. Acceptance of reality, which is the true basis of a mature political movement, had set in.

Even Yasser Abed Rabbo, a PLO executive-committee member from a radical faction called the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, who was with our group in Stockholm (and proved to be the most difficult to convince that the PLO should state unequivocally its acceptance of the conditions required by the United States) told me that the days of rhetoric and gesturing were over: The PLO had to adopt a realistic political program in order to achieve a state for its people.

The end of the Iran-Iraq conflict also facilitated the process. Iraq lined up with Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia in support of the PLO, mainly out of deep enmity toward Syrian President Hafez Assad, who had backed Iran in the war. The isolation of Syria weakened the hand of the murderous Palestinian rejectionist groups operating with the protection of Damascus, and thus permitted Arafat a greater degree of flexibility than ever before.

And the Soviets, pursuing their new foreign policy geared to resolving regional conflicts, pressed the PLO to move toward realistic goals. The Soviets encouraged Arafat to come to Stockholm and were of great assistance in moving him toward final satisfaction of the U.S. conditions.

Shultz, on the eve of leaving office, was also keenly interested in paving the way for renewed peace diplomacy by the Bush administration. The denial of a visa to Arafat to come to the U.N. General Assembly was widely criticized in all major capitals, as well as by the U.S. press. The stunning U.N. vote on the visa matter, isolating the United States and Israel, also sharpened Shultz's desire to take some affirmative step to move the peace process along.

My two meetings in Stockholm with the PLO—which opened the door for contact between the PLO and

the American government—came at the initiative of the Swedish foreign minister, Sten Andersson, a most remarkable man and a long-time friend of Israel. He had made a trip to Israel and the occupied territories last spring that galvanized him into action. Sweden's traditional role as a neutral country desirous to assist in defusing conflict was much in his mind. But Sweden could not conduct a dialogue directly with the PLO. Israel and the United States would not, and no American Jewish organization was willing to do so.

A solution emerged when Stanley Sheinbaum and I, as board members of the U.S. section of the Tel Aviv-based International Center for Peace in the Middle East, along with our executive director Drora Kass, agreed to meet with the PLO. We did so on the basis of the principles of our organization: mutual recognition of Israel and the Palestinians, PLO acceptance of Israel as a state in the region and self-determination for the Palestinians. The Swedes insisted that preparations be kept in total secrecy. I met with Foreign Minister Andersson in September in New York when he came to the General Assembly. We had an instant rapport, and for the first time I began to feel that a meeting could possibly come about.

We were invited to Stockholm for a meeting on Nov. 21 and 22 with a delegation headed by Khaled al-Hassan, chairman of the PLO's foreign-affairs committee. We

hammered out the Stockholm Declaration, which was signed by all present at the close of a late dinner. We were most insistent on that part of the declaration in which the PLO accepted the existence of Israel as a state in the region and renounced terrorism.

Andersson said last week that he believed this secret meeting in November was the "crucial event" that made the later public breakthrough possible.

The Swedish government, at our request, advised Shultz of its invitation to us and later transmitted the text of the declaration to him. The obvious necessary next step was for Arafat and his executive committee to confirm and publicize the declaration. But after Shultz denied Arafat his visa, we didn't think this would happen.

To our surprise, the Swedes called us on Friday, Dec. 2, and advised that Arafat would meet us in Stockholm on Dec. 6 and 7 and that he was prepared to confirm the declaration. The Swedes so advised Shultz. The text of the conditions required by the United States for a dialogue with the PLO was given to the Swedes, obviously with Stockholm's hope that the PLO would agree to it during the course of our face-to-face



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meetings.

Even though the meetings went well and established a good working relationship, the PLO decided not to issue the text containing the U.S. conditions while in Stockholm. They chose to incorporate the required text in Arafat's speech to the United Nations in Geneva. This was communicated to Washington, and the State Department began to organize for that prospect.

Arafat's speech last Tuesday did not meet the exact language required, whether because of confusion in translation or because of a deliberate attempt to soften the text. The PLO drafter, Abu Sharif, thought he had done the job, but it was not so. All

Tuesday evening and into the early hours of Wednesday, multiple efforts were made by Arab leaders and others, including the Soviets and the Swedes, to urge Arafat to read the required text at his press conference.

The rest is history.

Where do we go next? Now that this small but all-important step has been taken, it is imperative for the Bush administration to identify a coherent approach to Israel, the PLO, Jordan and Syria. Official Israel is shocked and perhaps bruised by the developments of the last few

days. But the end of the total stalemate which has prevailed will now force reasonable Israelis to develop a realistic policy toward the Palestinians.

The most important step Israel can take is to permit free and open elections of Palestinian leaders in the West Bank and Gaza. Those elected will help Israel by providing a way to soften the military occupation, to limit abuse of the civilian population and to encourage the local Palestinians to channel their uprising into a less violent form.

All the Palestinian leaders elected, by definition, will be supported or chosen by the PLO, and the Israelis will now surely, with the help of the United States, come to accept this fact of life—for there are no other Palestinians who will stand for office. The United States has every right to press Israel to take this important step. The Camp David Accords, which Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir now embraces, call for Palestinian autonomy, and elections have long been understood as the first step on that road.

The United States and the Soviet Union should continue to push for an international peace conference, and to clarify their respective views about what should happen at this conference. Again, Prime Minister Shamir has endorsed the idea of a joint Soviet-American conference. The Geneva conference, still in existence but adjourned *sine die* in 1977, is the obvious vehicle. Should the Geneva conference reconvene, working bilateral groups could be set up, with the elected Palestinians represented in the Jordanian-Israeli group.

Real autonomy for the Palestinians, coupled with the gradual withdrawal of the Israeli military from most of the West Bank and Gaza (to be replaced by multilateral or U.N. peacekeeping forces) will defuse the deadly situation now operative and thus begin a slow but steady movement toward mutual accommodation. The Palestinian state declared in Algiers will not become a fact for some time to come. But, at last, hope will replace despair and reality will supplant delusion.

At some point it will become normal for Israelis to accept the idea of a mini-Palestinian state: demilitarized and linked to Jordan and Israel in a Benelux-type union. U.S. support for Israel's peace and security will remain steadfast, and the pressure on the PLO by its backers to continue on its new constructive path will reap the true benefits of a lasting peace.